

MURDALAND ISSUE #2 PREVIEW PDF

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Bo Sau (Vengeance) **Henry Chang**

DINNER BEFORE NOON

In late February, weeks past the Chinese New Year celebrations, the Chinatown mornings at last returned to normal. Gone was the four-deep crush of the crowds clamoring to buy chicken, for yook roast pig and duck. Missing were the flower vendors on every street corner, barking out offers of gladiolas and carnations. There wasn't an empty seat to be had in the Chinatown coffee shops then. Even early in the morning, the streets had been crowded with Chinese. Then the white tourists arrived in busloads – just as the area's office workers broke for lunch – and the whole neighborhood seemed like it would burst with traffic, noise and bustle.

Now the quiet mornings had returned. It was comforting, like the solitude of his overnight shift. Michael Mak was slurping his thousand-year egg congee, dunking a fried jow gwai cruller into the hot soupy rice mix. He was at a lone seat at the back table of Big Chang's fai sik fast food restaurant. It was almost noontime, which for him was a late dinnertime, nearly four hours after the overnight security shift at Confucius Towers. The freezing morning wind had whipped up his appetite.

He'd sat with his back to the wall, as usual, and was reading the sports section from the free newspaper he'd grabbed from the sidewalk box at Mott and Canal.

There was a rush of cold wind and he looked up to see a crew of Chinese laborers enter Big Chang's. For them, this was lunchtime and they took the large round table in the middle of the floor.

Mak returned to his newspaper and cruller, occasionally sneaking a look at the group as they placed their orders with the red-vested waiter. The quick-eats restaurant started filling up, the lunchtime crowd driven indoors by the February freeze.

Mak could overhear the banter of the construction crewmen as they sipped their hot tea, warming calloused hands wrapped around cheap ceramic cups.

He kept his head down, pretending to read the newspaper, when he heard one of the men use the phrase jook sing, the derogatory term for the American-born Chinese – empty pieces of bamboo.

Michael Mak himself was jook sing but was capable of speaking functional Cantonese and Toishanese, the main Chinatown dialects. He knew that native-born Chinese held the American-born in contempt, citing their ignorance of the great celestial traditions. He took no offense at the talk.

Mak folded the newspaper, then raised a lazy glance at the men, a cup of tea at his lips. The laborers continued their chatter. They were oblivious to him, but he focused on one of them. It was a face he hadn't seen in twenty years and now it was causing his blood to rise. The man was Tsi Mun, a former Chinatown gang member who, like Michael Mak, was in his forties now.

Mak lifted the newspaper so as to obscure his face. Tsi Mun was an old enemy with whom he had a longtime score to settle.

Twenty years before this congee morning, Tsi Mun had been a member of the Black Dragons street

gang, a motley crew of Hong Kong hotheads and Chinatown discards.

Tsi Mun was better known by his Cantonese street name, *Doe Jai* – Knife Boy. He had a reputation for being good with a blade.

One hot summer night, Doe Jai had bugged-out and in a fit of inexplicable rage, stabbed Mak's cousin, *Leng Jai* – Pretty Boy – so nicknamed because he was a good-looking flashy dresser, popular with the Chinatown girls.

Pretty Boy survived eight hours on the operating table, and that was just the first of his surgeries. They had opened him up and stitched him back and the jagged scars left a roadmap across his torso and back. Pretty Boy was never the same after the attack.

He had all kinds of problems and was always in pain. The surgeons removed part of his bladder and he couldn't even piss like a normal person.

Pretty Boy wasn't so popular after that.

A few years later he committed suicide.

Despite Michael Mak's attempts to locate him, Doe Jai was nowhere to be found. He had disappeared from Chinatown.

Mak's family and relatives relocated to Seattle Chinatown soon after, but Michael stayed behind and took over the rent-controlled family apartment in the tenement walkup on Bayard. For the first few years, Mak kept a lookout for Doe Jai, but over time the idea of revenge diminished, distant but not forgotten.

Now his target sat at the middle table, only fifteen feet away. Mak quietly clenched his fist, brought it under the table, trying to stay calm, trying to ignore the drumbeat in his chest.

A half-dozen plates of rice arrived at the big table. The men tore into the assortment of saam bo faahn dishes, their waiter ladling out steamy bowls of chicken feet soup.

Mak put his head down, appearing to read the table menu. He listened for the sound of Doe Jai's voice.

That's all of the story we can give you online.

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